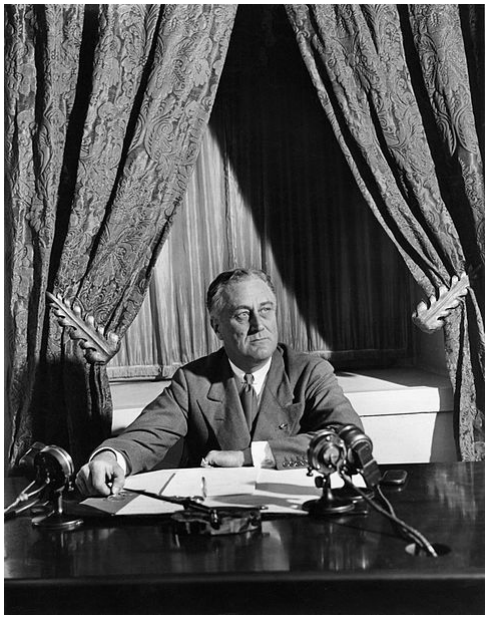
Fireside chats

The **fireside chats** were a series of evening radio addresses given by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the 32nd President of the United States, between 1933 and 1944. Roosevelt spoke with familiarity to millions of Americans about recovery from the Great Depression, the promulgation of the Emergency Banking Act in response to the banking crisis, the 1936 recession, New Deal initiatives, and the course of World

War II. On radio, he quelled rumors, countered conservative-dominated newspapers, and explained his policies directly to the American people. His tone and demeanor communicated self-assurance during times of despair and uncertainty. Roosevelt was regarded as an effective communicator on radio, and the fireside chats kept him in high public regard throughout his presidency. Their introduction was later described as a "revolutionary experiment with a nascent media platform."[1]

Fireside chat



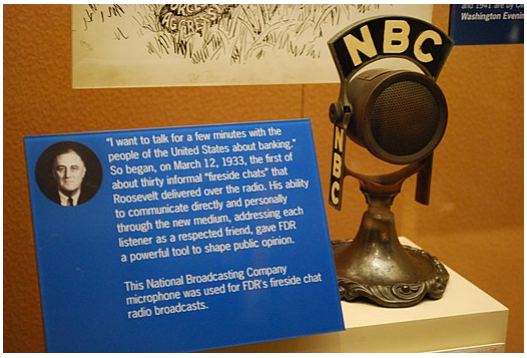
President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his first fireside chat, on the Emergency Banking Act, eight days after taking office (March 12, 1933).

Date	March 12, 1933 – June 12, 1944
Duration	11–44 minutes
Type	30 Presidential radio addresses

Participants	Franklin D. Roosevelt

The series of chats were among the first 50 recordings made part of the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress, which noted it as "an influential series of radio broadcasts in which Roosevelt utilized the media to present his programs and ideas directly to the public and thereby redefined the relationship between President Roosevelt and the American people in 1933."

Origin


NBC
"I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking." So began, on March 12, 1933, the first of about thirty informal "fireside chats" that Roosevelt delivered over the radio. His ability to communicate directly and personally through the new medium, addressing each listener as a respected friend, gave FDR a powerful tool to shape public opinion.
This National Broadcasting Company microphone was used for FDR's fireside chat radio broadcasts.
NBC microphone used for Roosevelt's fireside chat radio broadcasts

> *It cannot misrepresent or misquote. It is far-reaching and simultaneous in releasing messages given for transmission to the nation or for international consumption.*
>
> —*Stephen Early, Roosevelt's press secretary, on the value*

> *of radio*[2]:154

Roosevelt believed that his administration's success depended upon a favorable dialogue with the electorate, possible only through methods of mass communication, and that it would allow him to take the initiative. The use of radio for direct appeals was perhaps the most important of Roosevelt's innovations in political communication.[2]:153 Roosevelt's opponents had control of most newspapers in the 1930s and press reports were under their control and involved their editorial commentary. Historian Betty Houchin Winfield says, "He

and his advisers worried that newspapers' biases would affect the news columns and rightly so."[3] Historian Douglas B. Craig says that Roosevelt "offered voters a chance to receive information unadulterated by newspaper proprietors' bias" through the new medium of radio.[4]

Roosevelt first used what would become known as fireside chats in 1929 as Governor of New York.[5] Roosevelt was a Democrat facing a conservative Republican legislature, so during each legislative session he would occasionally address the residents of New York directly.[6] His third gubernatorial address—

April 3, 1929, on WGY radio—is cited by Roosevelt biographer Frank Freidel as being the first fireside chat.[6]

Fireside Chat 1 On the Banking Crisis

13:09

Roosevelt's first fireside chat on the Banking Crisis (March 12, 1933)

Problems playing this file? See media help.

As president, Roosevelt began making the informal addresses on March 12, 1933, eight days after his inauguration. He had spent his first week coping with a month-long epidemic of bank closings that was hurting families nationwide.[7]:78 He closed the entire American banking

system on March 6. On March 9, Congress passed the Emergency Banking Act, which Roosevelt used to effectively create federal deposit insurance when the banks reopened.[8] At 10 p.m. ET that Sunday night, on the eve of the end of the bank holiday, Roosevelt spoke to a radio audience of more than 60 million people, to tell them in clear language "what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be".[7]:78–79

The result, according to economic historian William L. Silber, was a "remarkable turnaround in the public's

confidence...The contemporary press confirms that the public recognized the implicit guarantee and, as a result, believed that the reopened banks would be safe, as the President explained in his first Fireside Chat." Within two weeks people returned more than half of the cash they had been hoarding, and the first stock-trading day after the bank holiday marked the largest-ever one-day percentage price increase.[8]

The term "fireside chat" was inspired by a statement by Roosevelt's press secretary, Stephen Early, who said that the president liked to think of the audience as a few

people seated around his fireside. One of the things is that listeners could see Roosevelt in his study, in front of the fireplace, and imagine they were sitting beside him.[9]:57–58 The term was coined by CBS broadcast executive Harry C. Butcher of the network's Washington, D.C., office,[10] in a press release before the address of May 7, 1933.[11] The phrase has often been credited to CBS journalist Robert Trout, but he said he was simply the first to use the phrase on the air.[12] The title was picked up by the press and public and later used by Roosevelt himself,[11] becoming part of American folklore.[10]

Presentation

Filmed excerpt of the fireside chat on the State of the Union (January 11, 1944),[13] in which Roosevelt discusses a Second Bill of Rights

> *It is whispered by some that only by abandoning our freedom, our ideals, our way of life, can we build our defenses adequately, can we match the strength of the aggressors. ... I do not share these fears.*

> —*Roosevelt's fireside chat of May 26, 1940*

Roosevelt customarily made his address from the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House. He would arrive 15 minutes before air time to welcome members of the press, including radio and newsreel correspondents. NBC White House announcer Carleton E. Smith gave him a simple introduction: "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States." Roosevelt most often began his talks with the words, "My friends" or "My fellow Americans", and he read his speech from a loose-leaf binder.[10] Presidential

advisor and speechwriter Samuel Rosenman recalled his use of common analogies and his care in avoiding dramatic oratory: "He looked for words that he would use in an informal conversation with one or two of his friends."[9]:58 Eighty percent of the words used were in the thousand most commonly used words in the English language.[14]

The radio historian John Dunning wrote that "It was the first time in history that a large segment of the population could listen directly to a chief executive, and the

chats are often credited with helping keep Roosevelt's popularity high."[10]

Each radio address went through about a dozen drafts. Careful attention was also given to Roosevelt's delivery. When he realized that a slight whistle was audible on the air due to a separation between his two front lower teeth, Roosevelt had a removable bridge made.[9]:58

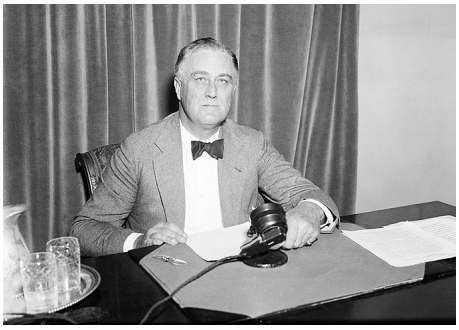
Roosevelt is regarded as one of the most effective communicators in radio history.[10] Although the fireside chats are often thought of as having been a weekly event, Roosevelt in fact delivered just 31

addresses[14] during his 4,422-day presidency.[15] He resisted those who encouraged him to speak on radio more frequently, as shown in his response to Russell Leffingwell after the address of February 23, 1942:

> *The one thing I dread is that my talks should be so frequent as to lose their effectiveness. ... Every time I talk over the air it means four or five days of long, overtime work in the preparation of what I say. Actually, I cannot afford to take*

> *this time away from more vital things. I think we must avoid too much personal leadership—my good friend Winston Churchill has suffered a little from this.*[9]:319–320

Gallery



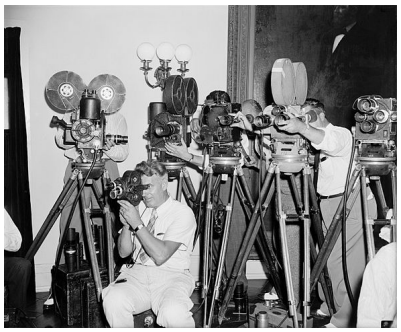
Fireside chat on the merits of the recovery program (June 28, 1934)

Fireside chat on government and capitalism (September 30, 1934)

Fireside chat on the WPA and the Social Security Act (April 28, 1935)

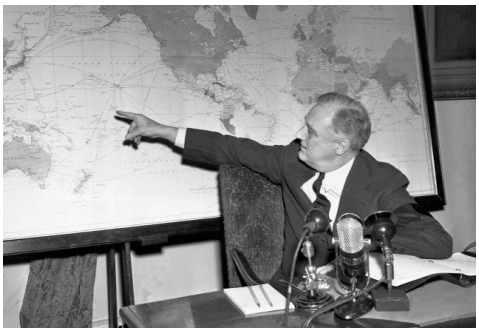
Fireside chat on drought conditions and labor (September 6, 1936)

Radio press at fireside chat (September 3, 1939)



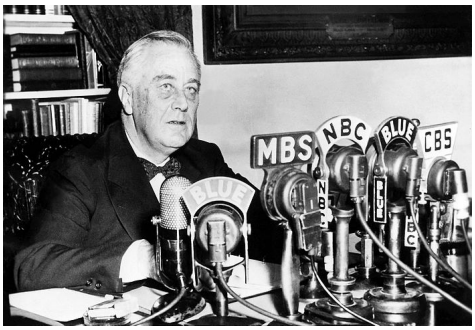
Newsreel cameras at fireside chat (September 3, 1939)

Fireside chat on maintaining freedom of the seas (September 11, 1941). The black armband signifies his mourning the death of his mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt.



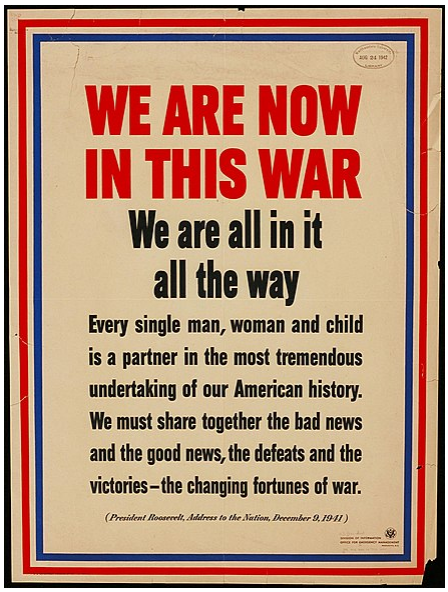
Fireside chat on the progress of the war (February 23, 1942)

Fireside chat on the Tehran Conference and Cairo Conference (December 24, 1943)[16]

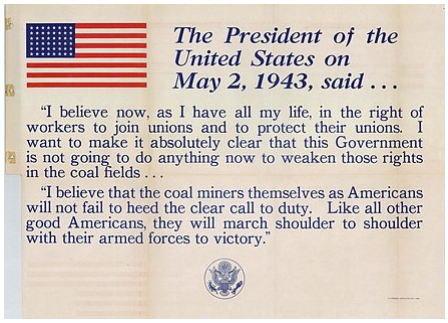


Fireside chat on the State of the Union (January 11, 1944)[13]

Chronological list of addresses


WE ARE NOW
IN THIS WAR
We are all in it
all the way
Every single man, woman and child
is a partner in the most tremendous
undertaking of our American history.
We must share together the bad news
and the good news, the defeats and the
victories—the changing fortunes of war.
(President Roosevelt, Address to the Nation, December 9, 1941)

Poster quoting Roosevelt's fireside chat of December 9, 1941


The President of the
United States on
May 2, 1943, said . . .
"I believe now, as I have all my life, in the right of workers to join unions and to protect their unions. I want to make it absolutely clear that this Government is not going to do anything now to weaken those rights in the coal fields . . .
"I believe that the coal miners themselves as Americans will not fail to heed the clear call to duty. Like all other good Americans, they will march shoulder to shoulder with their armed forces to victory."

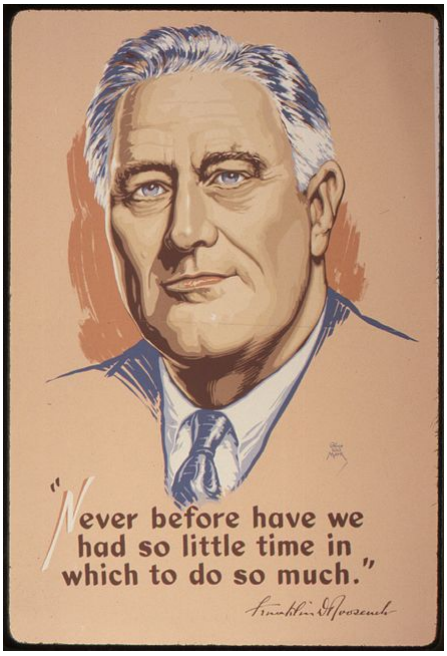
Poster quoting Roosevelt's fireside chat about the coal crisis. On May 1, 1943, Roosevelt issued an executive order that placed coal mines under the control of the U.S. government.

[Link to every chat (https://www.fdrlibrary.org/utterancesfdr)](https://www.fdrlibrary.org/utterancesfdr)

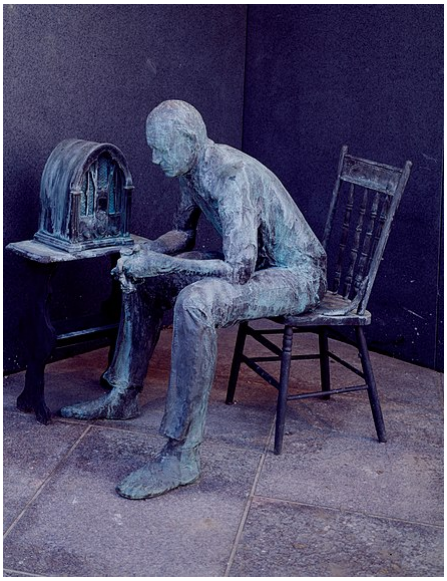
No.	Date	Topic	Length[17]	Ref.
1	Sunday, March 12, 1933	On the Banking Crisis	13:42	[18]
2	Sunday, May 7, 1933	Outlining the New Deal Program	22:42	[19]
3	Monday, July 24, 1933	On the National Recovery Administration	Not recorded	[20]
4	Sunday, October 22, 1933	On Economic Progress	Not recorded	[21]
5	Thursday, June 28, 1934	Achievements of the 73rd U.S. Congress and Critics of the New Deal	Not recorded	[22]
6	Sunday, September 30, 1934	On Government and Capitalism	27:20	[23]
7	Sunday, April 28, 1935	On the Works Relief Program and the Social Security Act	28:08	[24]
8	Sunday, September 6, 1936	On Drought Conditions, Farmers and Laborers	26:49	[25]
9	Tuesday, March 9, 1937	On the Reorganization of the Judiciary	35:28	[26]
10	Tuesday, October 12, 1937	On New Legislation to be Recommended to Congress	27:42	[27]
11	Sunday, November 14, 1937	On the Unemployment Census	14:16	[28]
12	Thursday, April 14, 1938	On the Recession	40:42	[29]
13	Friday, June 24, 1938	On Party Primaries	29:02	[30]
14	Sunday, September 3, 1939	On the European War	11:25	[31]
15	Sunday, May 26, 1940	On National Defense	31:32	[32]
16	Sunday, December 29, 1940	On the "Arsenal of Democracy"	36:53	[33]
17	Tuesday, May 27, 1941	Announcing Unlimited National Emergency	44:27	[34]
18	Thursday, September	On Maintaining Freedom of the Seas and the	28:33	[35]

	11, 1941	*Greer* Incident		
19	Tuesday, December 9, 1941	On the Declaration of War with Japan	26:19	[36]
20	Monday, February 23, 1942	On the Progress of the War	36:34	[37]
21	Tuesday, April 28, 1942	On Our National Economic Policy and Sacrifice	32:42	[38]
22	Monday, September 7, 1942	On Inflation and Progress of the War	26:56	[39]
23	Monday, October 12, 1942	Report on the Home Front	29:25	[40]
24	Sunday, May 2, 1943	On the Coal Crisis	21:06	[41]
25	Wednesday, July 28, 1943	On the Fall of Mussolini	29:11	[42]
26	Wednesday, September 8, 1943	On the Armistice with Italy and the Third War Loan Drive	12:38	[43]
27	Friday, December 24, 1943	On the Tehran and Cairo Conferences	28:29	[16]
28	Tuesday, January 11, 1944	On the State of the Union	30:20	[13]
29	Monday, June 5, 1944	On the Fall of Rome	14:36	[44]
30	Monday, June 12, 1944	Opening the Fifth War Loan Drive	13:02	[45]

Reception

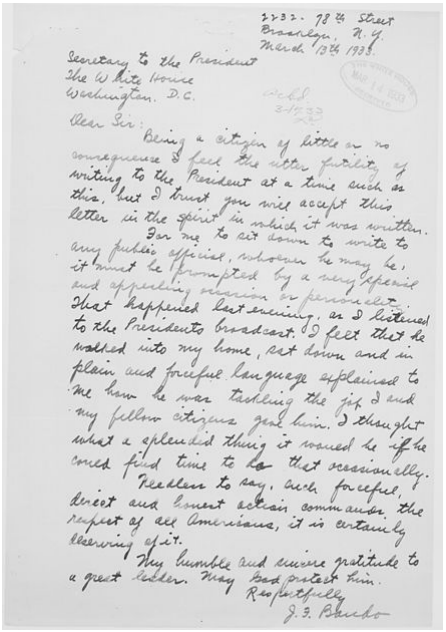


War Production Board poster quoting FDR's fireside chat of February 23, 1942



The Fireside Chat, bronze sculpture by George Segal in the Second-Term

Room of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, Washington, D.C.



2232 - 78 th Street
Brooklyn, N. Y.
March 13th 1933.

Secretary to the President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

Being a citizen of little or no consequence I feel the utter futility of writing to the President at a time such as this, but I trust you will accept this letter in the spirit in which it was written.

For me to sit down to write to any public official, whoever he may be, it must be prompted by a very special and appealing occasion or personality. That happened last evening, as I listened to the President's broadcast. I felt that he walked into my home, sat down and in plain and forceful language explained to me how he was tackling the job and my fellow citizens and him. I thought what a splendid thing it would be if he could find time to be that occasionally.

Needless to say, such forceful, direct and fluent action commands the respect of all Americans, it is certainly deserving of it.

My humble and sincere gratitude to a great leader. May God protect him.

Respectfully
J. F. Bando

Letter to the White House from J. F. Bando following the first fireside chat

Roosevelt's radio audiences averaged 18 percent during peacetime, and 58 percent during the war.[46] The fireside chats attracted more listeners than the most popular radio shows, which were heard by 30 to 35 percent of the radio audience. Roosevelt's fireside chat of December 29,

1940 was heard by 59 percent of radio listeners. His address of May 27, 1941, was heard by 70 percent of the radio audience.[9]:240

An estimated 62,100,000 people heard Roosevelt's fireside chat on December 9, 1941—two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor—attaining a Hooper rating of 79, the record high for a Presidential address.[47] Approximately 61,365,000 adults tuned on February 23, 1942, for Roosevelt's next fireside chat, in which he outlined the principal purposes of the war.[47] In advance of the address Roosevelt asked citizens to have a world

map in front of them as they listened to him speak. "I'm going to speak about strange places that many of them never heard of—places that are now the battleground for civilization," he told his speechwriters. "I want to explain to the people something about geography—what our problem is and what the overall strategy of the war has to be. … If they understand the problem and what we are driving at, I am sure that they can take any kind of bad news right on the chin." Sales of new maps and atlases were unprecedented, while many people retrieved old commercial maps from storage and pinned them up on their

walls.[9]:319 *The New York Times* called the speech "one of the greatest of Roosevelt's career".[9]:320

Novelist Saul Bellow recalled hearing a fireside chat while walking in Chicago one summer evening. "The blight hadn't yet carried off the elms, and under them, drivers had pulled over, parking bumper to bumper, and turned on their radios to hear Roosevelt. They had rolled down the windows and opened the car doors. Everywhere the same voice, its odd Eastern accent, which in anyone else would have irritated Midwesterners. You could follow without missing a single word

as you strolled by. You felt joined to these unknown drivers, men and women smoking their cigarettes in silence, not so much considering the President's words as affirming the rightness of his tone and taking assurance from it."[9]:450–451 [48]

This level of intimacy with politics made people feel as if they too were part of the administration's decision-making process and many soon felt that they knew Roosevelt personally. Most importantly, they grew to trust him. The conventional press grew to love Roosevelt because they too had gained unprecedented access to the goings-on of government.[49]

While many people revered Roosevelt for giving the speeches, there are some who have seen them as more detrimental than beneficial. A major criticism given about the fireside chats was this: “It can be argued that it is impracticable, that it rests on false assumptions about the nature of the American people, public opinion and Congress, and that the benefits of such a course are likely to be out-weighed by the evils.” Fireside chats are a way to address the public directly, but besides that there is no way to control what the public does with that information, or how they use it. Another major critique among the usage of fireside chats is that by using them, one

is more likely going to appeal to one side of an issue, essentially alienating anyone who is not in agreement. “The President may appeal successfully to a minority, even a majority, for its support, but if he does so by simultaneously creating a bitter, recalcitrant opposition that denies his authority and would resort even to violence to resist his policies, can one say that this is a successful President?”[50]

Legacy

Every U.S. president since Roosevelt has delivered periodic addresses to the American people, first on radio, and later adding television and the Internet. The

practice of regularly scheduled addresses began in 1982 when President Ronald Reagan started delivering a radio broadcast every Saturday.[51] Currently, presidents use newer and more advanced forms of communication using specific social media outlets to project to bigger groups of people. Recent presidents also use news broadcast stations to their benefit to communicate more efficiently with bigger audiences. President Barack Obama used the social media network Twitter for the first time in 2009 to address the public, much like Roosevelt did while giving his famous fireside chats.[52]

Accolades

The series of Roosevelt's 30 fireside chats was included with the first 50 recordings made part of the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress. It is noted as "an influential series of radio broadcasts in which Roosevelt utilized the media to present his programs and ideas directly to the public and thereby redefined the relationship between the President and the American people."[53]

See also

- *1600 Daily*

Further reading

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